

# AUDIO

## FAQ

### Q Can I use surround PC speakers in the living room with my DVD player?

**A** The standard format for DVD surround sound is Dolby Digital, so your playback device or your speakers must include Dolby Digital decoding in order to achieve surround sound. All DVD players recognise this format, but few can actually decode it.

Instead, most read it off the disc and send it, still encoded, to their S/PDIF digital audio output socket. This is fine if your surround-speaker system has an S/PDIF input and built-in Dolby Digital decoding. However, this is rare among PC speakers. One exception is Logitech's Z-5450 (see 'Also consider...' right), so this set will work with any DVD player.

Other PC speakers must be paired with a DVD player with built-in Dolby Digital decoding. You can check if yours has this by looking for six audio outputs, one for each speaker, on the back of your player.

**Ben Pitt**

Music and photography expert

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## PHILIPS GoGear SA6025

★★★★

£78 inc VAT

It seems that if an MP3 player wants to be taken seriously in 2007 it needs to be able to play videos, too. We're yet to be convinced that this is an essential feature, mostly because these players' screens are too small for anything except short clips, but it's a fun extra that we welcome if it works well and doesn't add to the cost.

The SA6025 is a little bulky for a solid-state MP3 player, but it looks extremely smart. Its 2.2in 320x240 screen is larger and more detailed than our current Best Buy, Sandisk's Sansa e270 (see 'Also consider...', below right). The player sits horizontally, so video is played in landscape mode.

The supplied Arcsoft MediaConverter software can convert a wide range of video formats to the player's native WMV format. The screen is bright and clear and photos looked excellent, but the video wasn't so good. File conversion uses a fixed compression ratio for video, which made smooth areas of colour such as skies look blocky. It's a shame that video quality settings can't be chosen.

Windows Media Player 11 handles music transfers in its usual friendly, efficient manner, but the 1.28MB/s transfer speed is disappointing. Using the player itself conjures up a similar experience: the menus are well laid out, closely resembling the iPod's friendly menu system, but the player takes around half a second to respond to each button push. It doesn't keep up with repeated clicks to jump through music library lists and there's no



rotary dial for fast scrolling through lists. With the 36 albums we managed to fit on to the 2GB player we tested, we didn't find the sluggish menus too annoying, but it's likely to be more irritating on the highest-capacity 4GB player. We also found it strange that the display wasn't used to display album artwork, which feels like a missed opportunity to us.

The player's sound quality was up to scratch, with plenty of volume and well-defined high frequencies. Unfortunately, this exaggerated the headphones' slightly harsh tone, with too much treble and not enough bass. We managed to correct it using the Custom EQ function, but sound quality remained good rather than excellent with the supplied headphones and we'd recommend upgrading.

We would be reluctant to spend £78 on a 2GB MP3 player, but the 4GB version (called the SA6045) is better value at £96 including VAT from [www.dixons.co.uk](http://www.dixons.co.uk). However, for the same price, you can pick up an 8GB Sandisk e280, which includes higher-quality headphones and better, more responsive controls. Sadly, the GoGear SA6025's superior screen isn't enough to redress the balance.

Ben Pitt

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Smart design
- ✗ Unresponsive buttons
- ✗ Slow USB transfers

MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM audio, JPEG images, WMV video, USB Hi-speed interface  
PART CODE SA6025/02  
SUPPLIER [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.philips.co.uk](http://www.philips.co.uk)

### PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



## Also consider...

### PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT

Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC via a wireless network and plays it on your hi-fi. It comes with Philips' own server program, but you can also use it with Windows Media Connect.

The SLA5520 is quite a basic device, but it's a great buy if you want an easy way to play your music wirelessly.



WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER Supports MP3, Wav, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11g interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3/8mm socket audio output. Requires Windows 2000/XP

SUPPLIER [www.broadbandstuff.co.uk](http://www.broadbandstuff.co.uk)

DETAILS [www.philips.com](http://www.philips.com)

✓ Good value ✗ Screen hard to read

FULL REVIEW Jul 2006

### LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

The X-230s sound clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50 and quite a few that are more expensive than that. If you're looking for a good set for music or games, there are no better speakers available at this price.



STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1, 32W power, 3/8mm stereo cable inputs

PART CODE 970123-1120

SUPPLIER [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

DETAILS [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com)

✓ Excellent sound quality ✗ Cabling is awkward

FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

### LOGITECH Z-5450

★★★★★

£209 inc VAT

Logitech's Z-5450 5.1 surround-sound speakers transmit sound to the rear set wirelessly, so you'll have less clutter in your living room. Sound quality is excellent and the speakers are loud.

With loads of inputs and a decoder, these speakers are perfect for a PC or DVD player.



5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs, one coaxial and two optical digital inputs, 315W RMS power

PART CODE 970191-0120

SUPPLIER [www.allmacshop.co.uk](http://www.allmacshop.co.uk)

DETAILS [www.logitech.co.uk](http://www.logitech.co.uk)

✓ Sound great; loads of features

✗ Expensive

FULL REVIEW Dec 2006

## JAMO i200

★★★  
£120 inc VAT



Jamo's iPod dock speaker system aims for minimalist chic, but its plastic finish makes it look a little cheap. A spring-loaded door pushes back to reveal the iPod dock, but makes it a little tricky to fit the correct dock adaptor and really tricky to remove it if you need to fit another.

Power and play/pause buttons reside on the side of the speakers, but the only volume control is on the remote control, which is a serious oversight considering the usual fate of remote controls. At least this remote is better-looking than most. A mini-jack input caters for other brands of MP3 player and there's an auxiliary output for connecting to other speakers.

Sound quality is below what we would expect from £120 speakers, even compared to other iPod dock systems, which invariably command high prices. Bass was thin, leaving brittle-sounding middle and high frequencies and a disappointing top volume. Logitech's AudioStation (see 'Also consider...', below) costs just £8 more and sounds and looks considerably better.

Ben Pitt

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Good-looking remote control
- ✗ Clumsy design
- ✗ Overpriced

**IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS** Line input, iPod dock connector, auxiliary output  
PART CODE 86211  
SUPPLIER [www.empiredirect.co.uk](http://www.empiredirect.co.uk)  
DETAILS [www.jamo.co.uk](http://www.jamo.co.uk)

## CREATIVE Zen Stone

★★★★★  
£24 inc VAT



**BEST BUY** The Zen Stone is Creative's attempt to steal business from Apple's iPod Shuffle (see 'Also consider...', below). It's not as small or as cute as Apple's baby player, but it's still very compact and portable. It's available in a choice of six colours and, with no screen and barely any features, the controls are about as simple as they come.

The Shuffle is the better sounding of the two. Neither's headphones offer much bass, but the Shuffle's headphone output is brighter and clearer. The Zen Stone's transfers are slow at 0.6MB/s and the nine-hour battery life is underwhelming (the Shuffle manages 2.37MB/s and almost 17 hours).

On the plus side, the switch for selecting continuous or random playback also includes the ability to jump to the next folder. With the Shuffle, you can only skip track by track. Best of all, the Zen Stone is half the price.

Ben Pitt

### SUMMARY

- ✓ Small and simple
- ✓ Incredibly cheap
- ✗ Short battery life; slow transfers

**MP3 PLAYER** 1GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM and Audible, USB interface  
PART CODE 70PF213000115  
SUPPLIER [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)  
DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

### PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



## CHOOSING A... Speaker System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

**SURROUND FORMAT:** Stereo

**RMS POWER:** 5W

**INPUTS:** 1x analogue

**BUILT-IN DECODING:** None

Recommended minimum in grey

**1** PC speaker systems, which consist of speakers and an amplifier to power them, can cost anything from £5 to £300. The cheapest sets, with the specifications shown in grey above, will be fine for those who simply want to play Windows alert noises on a PC they use solely for work.

**2** Those who use their PC for any kind of entertainment should go for a better system. The first thing to look for is a subwoofer, which handles bass frequencies, while the satellites output mid- and high-frequency sounds.

Other than this, the best way to establish the quality of a system is to consult our reviews. Specifications don't tell you much and the price of a system often bears little relation to its actual performance.

**3** Games and DVDs will benefit greatly from a surround-sound system. The standard surround configuration is 5.1, which consists of five satellite speakers and one subwoofer, but those who must have the latest technologies should consider 6.1 or 7.1 speakers, plus a compatible sound card that is capable of supporting the extended Dolby Digital EX format.

**4** The power rating can give you a rough idea of how loud the speakers will go. Ignore PMPO or Peak Power ratings, which can be as much as 40 times the RMS figure.

A 50W RMS system should provide ample volume for a desktop PC, but for a home cinema look for 100W RMS or more.

**5** Stereo speakers need only a single analogue stereo input, while a 5.1 system needs three. Surround-sound systems that incorporate Dolby Digital decoders must be fed through an S/PDIF digital input, which comes in (non-compatible) coaxial and optical versions. However, as Dolby Digital decoding can be handled in software, surround speakers with analogue inputs are far more cost-effective.

## LOGITECH AudioStation

★★★★★  
£127 inc VAT



Logitech's AudioStation is a mid-range iPod speaker dock, but it sounds better than many that cost more. It's the only dock we've tested with an FM tuner, a sensible addition given no iPod has its own. You can't synchronise a docked iPod with your PC, but the AudioStation is great value, and the first iPod dock to deserve our Best Buy award.



**IPOD DOCK STEREO SPEAKERS** iPod dock connector and 3.5mm stereo line input, composite/S-video outputs, FM radio, 80W RMS power PART CODE 970217-0120 SUPPLIER [www.lambdtek.com](http://www.lambdtek.com) DETAILS [www.logitech.co.uk](http://www.logitech.co.uk) ✓ Clear, loud sound ✗ No iPod PC connector FULL REVIEW Jan 2007

## SANDISK Sansa e270

★★★★★ **PRICE CUT!**  
£88 inc VAT



Sandisk's Sansa e270 has 6GB of storage, but it costs less than Apple's 2GB iPod Nano. Unlike the Nano, it can play back video files on its colour screen; its software makes it easy to convert and transfer them. It isn't as easy to use as an iPod, but its good battery and sound make it a great choice.

**FLASH MP3 PLAYER** 6GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM music, JPEG/bitmap picture files and proprietary video files, USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE SDMX4-6144 SUPPLIER [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) DETAILS [www.sandisk.co.uk](http://www.sandisk.co.uk) ✓ Lots of space; good sound ✗ Nano has better controls FULL REVIEW Feb 2007



## APPLE iPod Shuffle

★★★★★  
£50 inc VAT



Apple's tiny iPod Shuffle is affordable and beautifully designed. It's light, with an integrated metal clip that grips clothing securely. The controls are basic; you can only skip tracks. The battery life and sound are both good, though, so it's a great player if you can live without a screen and don't mind using iTunes.

**FLASH MP3 PLAYER** 1GB capacity, supports MP3, AAC, protected AAC, Wav, AIFF, audible and Apple lossless music, USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE MA564ZT/A SUPPLIER [www.dabs.com](http://www.dabs.com) DETAILS [www.apple.com/uk](http://www.apple.com/uk) ✓ Tiny; great design ✗ No display FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

